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*Addressing Constructions of 'Bullying' in the British Army:
A Framework for Analysis*
by Charles Kirke

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**DEFENCE ACADEMY
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM**

**ADDRESSING CONSTRUCTIONS
OF 'BULLYING' IN THE
BRITISH ARMY:
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CHARLES KIRKE

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'BULLYING' IN THE BRITISH ARMY

Abstract

'Bullying' in the British Army has attracted a great amount of media and political attention in recent years. However, whilst there is near-universal agreement that 'bullying' is morally wrong and bad for individual and institutional morale, the implied or assumed meaning of the word 'bullying' seems to vary among those making statements about it. In effect, uses of the word 'bullying' when applied to the British Army are constructed in different ways by different observers, their constructions often remaining implicit and so closed to discussion. This paper, based on the study of the British Army's organizational culture over many years, offers an initial attempt at a framework for description, analysis and explanation of events where oppressive coercive behaviour is used, to provide an objective means to address cases where 'bullying' might appear to have taken place. It is hoped that this framework can be developed through further research.

Key Words: *Bullying, British Army, Military Anthropology*

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Addressing Constructions of 'Bullying' in the British Army: A Framework for Analysis

by

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Introduction

Corporal Jenson¹ was a fit and strong young man, smartly turned out and extrovert, and a skilled soldier. He was also a prominent sportsman, boxing for his unit. He seemed a highly suitable man to be a training NCO in a recruit training unit, and was accordingly posted to such a unit in the late 1970s.² He did well in his first year. His section was always efficient and smart and sharp on the up-take. He delivered results.

Something rather odd happened in his second year, though. The parents of one of his recruits complained to his Commanding Officer (CO) that their son was being 'bullied' by an NCO called Jenson. The accusation was investigated, but no evidence was found and the subject was dropped. Clearly, the recruit had been misinterpreting the hard regime of the training regiment – after all, the task was to turn soft young men into soldiers, a demanding job for which toughness was essential.

A few months later, Corporal Jenson was spotted by one of his superior officers hitting a recruit behind one of the accommodation blocks. A day or so later this recruit's parents complained loudly to the CO about Corporal Jenson's behaviour and threatened to go to the press. Given the unequivocal report given by the officer to the CO and the threat of press involvement, this case had to be properly, formally, and publicly investigated. Corporal Jenson was court-martialled for assault, a serious civilian offence, dismissed from the service, and sentenced to a two-year term in a civilian prison. His only defence, and one which he clearly believed was sufficient until he was found guilty, was that informal punishments of the type he had handed out were 'normal' for the situation, and, indeed, such punishments delivered to him when he was a recruit had made him the good soldier that he (undoubtedly) was. In private, his peers agreed with him, and felt a serious injustice had been done but none were prepared to say so at his Court Martial.

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Was Corporal Jenson doing his duty, or was he a sadistic bully abusing his position? Although his actions were a matter of record, his construction of them was very different from the way they appeared to the recruit's parents, and from the formal face of the British Army as expressed through the Court Martial. His construction of his behaviour was positive: he was applying methods and lessons that he had learned in his earlier service to correcting a recruit to achieve a positive end, both for the organization and for the recruit. His action was part of the process of turning a young man from a civilian into a good soldier. On the other hand, the recruit's parents constructed Corporal Jenson's action as 'bullying', unjustified under any circumstances and the material for a public scandal. The Court Martial's construction of the event was that the law had been broken and that an assault had taken place, an incident that could not be justified under any current military rule, military law, or civilian law. We have no means of telling at this distance how the event was constructed by the recruit himself, but other members of the permanent staff of the unit constructed Jenson's activity as probably justified and the recruit's response (telling his parents) as a cowardly act aimed at damaging the career of a good NCO.

Could they all have been right?

There is near-universal agreement among members of, and commentators on, the British Army that 'bullying' is morally wrong and bad for individual and institutional morale. However, it does not appear that the implied or assumed meaning of the word 'bullying' is universal to those making statements about it, any more than any complex phenomenon is universally perceived.³ This leads to the conclusion that whilst 'bullying' is a widely recognized topic, empirically identified instances of 'bullying' may contain a significant element of social construction. Furthermore, the particular constructions of 'bullying' appear seldom to be declared, revealed or explored: they remain implicit and thus closed to discussion. Accordingly, what is missing from current analyses and descriptions of 'bullying' in the British Army is an agreed framework for analysis that is sufficiently clear to allow all parties to debate the subject in a mutually understandable way. This paper therefore examines a range of behaviours in the British Army that might be constructed as 'bullying' as a first step in evolving an appropriate theoretical framework through which this highly emotive subject can be analyzed, described and examined, as far as possible in a dispassionate way.

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There is a growing literature on 'bullying', mostly concentrating on the areas of the workplace and in schools, and among adolescents outside schools.⁴ However, the scholarly open literature on bullying in the British Army is sparse⁵ (in sharp contrast to articles and reports in popular literature and media programmes⁶), and this paper is a first stage in contributing a specific scholarly insider assessment of the issues compressed into the term 'bullying' in that context. It represents an early view, based on related research that did not specifically address 'bullying', and should be looked upon as a preliminary to a better developed study for the future. Its academic foundation is a social anthropological study into the organizational culture of the British Army at unit level carried out on an opportunity basis from 1974 and more intensively from 1993,⁷ combined with the researcher's experience as a commissioned Army officer (Royal Regiment of Artillery) between 1970 and 2004.

This paper therefore presents a framework for thinking about the subject of 'bullying' in the British Army, seeking to provide a means to analyze, describe, and explain behaviour that might be construed as 'bullying'.

Definitions of 'Bullying'

The first obstacle to the pursuit of a theoretical framework for the description and analysis of 'bullying' is that there is no widely accepted definition of the term. As the House of Commons Defence Committee declared in their report on 'Duty of Care' [in the British Armed Forces], 'there seems to be no agreed definition of bullying, although most people would expect to recognise it'.⁸ Acting as a spokesman for the Army, Colonel David Eccles said to the Committee that the presence or absence of 'bullying' should be derived from the intention of the person who is carrying out the activity: if it is for a positive military reason then it is not 'bullying' but if it is 'for some less honourable motive then perhaps we would define it as bullying'.⁹ This exclusion from the category of 'bullying' of activity that is carried out for positive organizational reasons is an important military proviso, given that the military is a robust organization and that types of aggressive behaviour that would seem to be 'bullying' in other contexts can be necessary in the military. It must therefore be taken into account for any definition of 'bullying' in the military context.

However, in commenting, the Committee drew attention to the fact that the Army's definition was unusual in that it did not explicitly include the

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impact on the victim,¹⁰ a widely recognized element in the study of the subject..¹¹ This appears to be an important point, and we therefore need to expand on Colonel Eccles' definition for this paper.

A wider perspective that is far removed from the specifics of the British Army is that of Einarsen *et al*, who attempt to approach the topic of bullying at work from an international perspective, combining the distinctive Scandinavian approach with approaches from other European countries and without any special reference to the military. Their definition of 'bullying at work' is that it is

*'about repeated actions and practices that are directed against one or more workers, that are unwanted by the victim, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment'.*¹²

This seems to be a useful basis for a definition of 'bullying' in the British Army unit context. However, we need to take into account that a military unit is not the sort of 'workplace' that is generally found in industry and commerce. British Army units are distinct from 'normal' places of work in that they have many of the features of a 'total institution' in Goffman's characterization,¹³

'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.' [page xiii]

In many cases (such as recruits and officer cadets in training, and soldiers accommodated in barracks) the soldier's work-place situation can be the main locus of their life both on and off duty. Even those living outside the barracks in married quarters will still have a lifestyle that is based largely upon their unit (and thus within the zone of any oppression that they experience there). The effects of any 'bullying at work', therefore, that takes place in Army units will be exacerbated and intensified by the reduced opportunities for individuals to step away from the context of the bullying.

The following definition of 'bullying' specific to the British Army is therefore offered as a working definition for this paper, combining the observations of Colonel Eccles and Einarsen, and taking into consideration the 'total institution' element::

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Bullying in the British military context can be defined as actions and practices that are directed against one of more soldiers that are unwanted by the recipient, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but cause humiliation, offence and distress, and cannot be justified as aimed at achieving operationally advantageous results. Such actions may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working and living environment.

This definition has the advantages that it encompasses both the victim and the bully, and that it allows for 'unconscious' bullying activity and for the special lifestyle of those involved. However, the necessity for the activity to be 'repeated' may not fit some reported cases of military 'bullying', particularly incidents where junior personnel are humiliated by their seniors for a brief and well-defined period, and this should be borne in mind later in this paper when 'initiation ceremonies' are discussed.

But what of robust activity that is unpleasant to experience that is not 'bullying' by this definition? Given that they may not be separable when they are observed in the first instance, we need an umbrella term that covers both 'bullying' and unpleasant 'not-bullying'. As a working term, this paper uses '*oppressive coercive behaviour*' to denote activity that involves the handing out of aggression and/or robustness and firmness, has an intention to undermine the status of the recipient, and, from the recipient's point of view may bring feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, offence and distress. The key question which then remains is how instances of *oppressive coercive behaviour* can be adjudged to be 'bullying' or 'not bullying'.

This question can only be answered by addressing the physical and social context in which *oppressive coercive behaviour* might take place. We will begin by dividing the context by rank relations – senior-on-junior *oppressive coercive behaviour*, and peer-on-peer *oppressive coercive behaviour* – to derive a basic framework of operationally advantageous (organizationally positive 'not-bullying') and operationally disadvantageous (organizationally negative – 'bullying') behaviours. We will then consider ambiguous contexts, where *oppressive coercive behaviour* is carried out without the endorsement of the formal rules, but which may seem at least to some of the participants to have organizationally positive consequences, and finally we will consider the effect that different operational environments have on the appropriateness of different degrees of *oppressive coercive behaviour*.

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Senior-on-Junior *Oppressive Coercive Behaviour*

In common with at least all Western industrial armies, the British Army is a disciplined service with a formal rank structure. One of the ways in which the formal life of the Army is played out is in the giving of orders in a firm and clear manner, and another is the expectation of more or less authoritarian modes of behaviour at certain levels in the rank structure. Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), and especially senior NCOs and warrant officers, are expected to be able to behave in formal and functional contexts with a certain measure of firmness and aggression towards their juniors, in order to promote disciplined behaviour, adherence to formal rules, and the carrying out of functional military tasks (especially in emergencies or moments of high tension). This is balanced, in different contexts, by a need for all soldiers¹⁴ in authority to form warm informal bonds with their juniors to enable them to support them (and to receive support in return), mentor and encourage them, to share expertise, and to carry out their very important pastoral roles.¹⁵ It is to be expected, therefore, that behaviour between individuals separated by rank in one type of context may be *oppressive coercive* but in another type of context it may not, assuming that the authority figures are acting within the cultural norms of the military. Individual actors (social agents) have the social conventions of the strong and complex organizational culture of the unit for reference as to the nuances of such behaviour.

The formal and informal conventions of military culture thus provide a set of contexts in which *oppressive coercive behaviour* can be expected to be manifested by senior personnel against junior ones. Such behaviour would include shouting, aggression, threats of violence and disciplinary action, and ridicule – aspects that fit well with unstructured concepts of 'bullying'. However, in these contexts, they are positively cued by the organizational culture and accepted by all culturally adapted members of the military group as being for positive organizational ends, however unpleasant they are to experience. Examples of such contexts are the enforcement of formal discipline (for instance, summary jurisdiction and the immediate correction of minor infringements of the formal rules), and the carrying out of military training for combat. Such action is unambiguously for 'positive military ends', and not 'bullying'.

So, if a sergeant shouts aggressively at private soldiers for wearing their uniform incorrectly, or dropping a cigarette on the ground in contravention of formal rules, then the sergeant is not committing 'bullying'. Similarly, if a commissioned officer in charge of a group of recruits shooting on a rifle

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range observes one of them carrying out an unsafe practice, then it is his or her duty to act in an *oppressive coercive* manner towards that recruit.

That is not to say, of course, that all senior-to-junior *oppressive coercive behaviour* is for positive ends, and that 'bullying' never happens. The very power and authority vested in the rank structure provide the means for oppression that is not positive. In certain cases authority figures can so embrace the authoritarian approach that they neglect, or are unable to develop, the organizationally warm informal relationships that we visited above. Their leadership becomes what has been called 'toxic'.¹⁶ Toxic leadership is, by definition, organizationally negative as it oppresses the members of the organization and reduces their effectiveness. Its characteristics are unremitting domination of the more junior personnel, without any warmth in personal relationships, which is experienced as a form of 'bullying'. Toxic leadership is ascribed by Marcia Whicker to poor development in respect to psychological needs¹⁷ and she notes that toxic leaders 'are maladjusted, malcontent, and often malevolent, even malicious. They succeed in tearing others down'.¹⁸ Although this key term was first used to describe damaging leadership in commerce and industry, it has certain resonances with the military, as George Reed has shown in the context of the US military.¹⁹

Oppressive coercive behaviour, therefore, by a leader who does not form warm informal relationships with all of his or her subordinates (rather than a coterie of courtiers) is likely to be 'toxic' and to be experienced negatively by the junior recipients.

Apart from toxic leadership, the extreme case, any use of power and authority to oppress junior personnel for personal purposes or for personal satisfaction would also fall outside any definition of 'positive ends' for the institution. Extreme examples may include cases of racial and sexual harassment, indecent or common assault, and the exercise of power and domination for its own sake.²⁰ The more extreme the example, the more obvious a case of 'bullying' it is, and the more likely it appears to be to result in formal disciplinary action against the 'bully'.

However, it is worth noting that the authority figures exercising *oppressive coercive behaviour* are not acting in isolation. They have superiors in the chain of command whose duty it is to supervise their behaviour to a greater or lesser degree (depending on context). Serious breaches of the law and cultural norms ought to be detected in the normal process of unit life and corrective action ought to be taken to change the bully's behaviour. This control system is seldom mentioned by the media and appears to have little public acknowledgement, but it is an important part of the life of a unit. In effect,

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for every person who uses *oppressive coercive behaviour* for his or her personal ends, there are many others whose potential to be a bully has been curbed by sensitive and firm management within the institution.

These considerations lead us to the first element in the framework which is to be built in this paper. This element captures the polarization of organizationally positive and negative *oppressive coercive behaviour*, with the defining principle that ‘positive’ implies a motive of institutional gain, and ‘negative’ implies a motive of personal satisfaction or the playing out of personal feelings against a subordinate.

<i>Oppressive Coercive Behaviour</i>	
Positive	Negative
1 Use of the authority structure for positive institutional ends	2 Exploitation of the rank and authority structure for personal satisfaction Toxic leadership

Fig 1: Framework Stage One

Peer-to-Peer Oppressive Coercive Behaviour

‘Bullying’ is not, of course, confined in any schema to senior-on-junior *oppressive coercive behaviour*. Peer-on-peer *oppressive coercive behaviour* also occurs often enough to be recognizable. Indeed, the House of Commons Defence Committee found that, in the recruit context, ‘bullying’ was more common between peers than by authority figures.²¹ As far as legal frameworks are concerned, there is no formal justification for *oppressive coercive behaviour* between peers, so there is a *prima facie* case to state that all such behaviour is likely to be identifiable as ‘bullying’. There may, however, be exceptions, as we shall see. It tends to appear in the form of regular and systematic oppression of an individual or small group who either do not conform to the main group’s self- or organizationally-constructed standards or are in some way easy to single out by aspects of their appearance (size, strength, birth marks, for example) or behaviour or beliefs. The term ‘mobbing’ has been usefully applied to this situation by Leymann.²²

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<i>Oppressive Coercive Behaviour</i>	
Positive	Negative
1 Use of the authority structure for positive institutional ends	2 Exploitation of the rank and authority structure for personal satisfaction Toxic leadership
3	4 Peer-on-peer (mobbing)

Fig 2: Framework Stage Two

Ambiguous Oppressive Coercive Behaviour

Unfortunately for such a clear cut schema as presented in Figure 2, there are various elements in the organizational culture of the British Army at unit level that are ambiguous or marginal, or ill-defined in practice. They are either not governed by clear cut-rules, or they are seen as exceptions to the rules, and they happen at the margins of the disciplinary and authority system. They present a challenging set of confounding issues.

The first concerns attitudes to breaking or bending formal rules. In earlier research, I have drawn on Goffman's analysis of total institutions to provide a framework for understanding British soldiers' behaviour towards formal rules.²³ This involved a development of Goffman's characterization of 'primary' and 'secondary' adjustments to behaviour.²⁴ Primary adjustments, in Goffman's analysis, are those actions that conform to the rules of the particular institution. Secondary adjustments are unauthorized actions and activities that are employed by individuals and groups to improve their lives, and they sometimes become 'so much an accepted part of the workings of an organization that they take on the character of 'perquisites', combining the qualities of being neither openly demanded nor openly questioned'.²⁵ Using material from my research in the Army I have divided the category of 'secondary adjustment' into 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' secondary adjustments. 'Legitimate secondary adjustments' are those unauthorized activities that are unlikely to attract official censure from the chain of command of the unit in question, whilst 'illegitimate' ones will. Thus, for example, in some of the

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units that I observed over the past twenty-five years, soldiers going absent without leave would find on their return that their military kit had been pilfered by their fellow-soldiers. This was unofficially looked upon by the chain of command as 'legitimate' in that the colleagues of the absentee would have to cover for his work and do unpleasant duties that he would have done had he been there: the pilfering of his kit was a *quid pro quo*. In contrast, the soldiers in one particular unit who competed in 'roof races' across the tops of the barrack buildings at night knew they would have to conceal this activity from all authority figures as it would be seen as stupid and unsafe and would not be tolerated: roof races were an illegitimate secondary adjustment.

In my characterization, the issue of 'legitimacy' and 'illegitimacy' is resolved at a personal level. An individual actor has their own mental map of what will and what will not provoke official censure, constructed from their own experience, the prevailing organizational culture, and specific statements and actions of their superiors. In effect, it is the immediate superior in the chain of command who defines official and unofficial categories of 'legitimacy' and 'illegitimacy', but in the absence of any definition, the individual agent constructs their own.

Certain instances of *oppressive coercive behaviour* will naturally fall into the category of 'secondary adjustment' and it is useful to examine them through this characterization of 'legitimate and illegitimate secondary adjustments'. In essence, if this behaviour, in the perception of the actor, is not going to attract official disapproval and he or she believes that it is for some institutionally beneficial or justifiable purpose then it is not negative behaviour. So,

<i>Oppressive Coercive Behaviour</i>	
Positive	Negative
1 Use of the authority structure for positive institutional ends	2 Exploitation of the rank and authority structure for personal satisfaction Toxic leadership
3	4 Peer-on-peer (mobbing)
5 Legitimate secondary adjustments involving <i>oppressive coercive behaviour</i>	6 Illegitimate secondary adjustments involving <i>oppressive coercive behaviour</i>

Fig 3: Framework Stage Three

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for example, the NCO who awards a wayward or incompetent private soldier an unofficial punishment that is common practice in the unit is carrying out a legitimate secondary adjustment. In contrast, to take an imaginary case, another NCO who forces errant private soldiers to pay fines to him (which he subsequently uses as drinking money) will know that such activity is never going to attract the approval or tolerance of the chain of command: it is an illegitimate secondary adjustment.

Although it is relatively simple to model and demonstrate the concepts involved in secondary adjustments, there are some very real difficulties in applying it to empirical cases. There are two main variables that may either distort or alter the picture to a considerable degree. The first is that legitimacy and illegitimacy are in the mind of the actor at the moment of action, and the actor may have miscalculated or misunderstood his or her position. Furthermore, there may not be universal agreement within the unit about these categories in particular cases. For example, in a particular unit in the 1970s it was common practice (and viewed as 'legitimate') for individuals to exaggerate their motor mileage claims for leave, thus claiming more money than they were entitled to. Members of the Army felt that they were badly paid at the time, and the people involved clearly felt that if a claim was both logical and possible it should be treated as a perk, and there was no official action against it from the unit pay office. However, other individuals in the unit felt that it was immoral to lie on official forms, particularly where money was concerned, and that this action was 'illegitimate'. The issue was finally resolved when the Royal Military Police intervened and prosecuted a number of those who had made some wildly exaggerated claims. This formally declared in the sight of all that such action was an 'illegitimate secondary adjustment', and it stopped being viewed as a legitimate perk.

This case also illustrates the second variable: however clear the case for legitimacy or illegitimacy appears to be at any particular time, the formal rules can always be changed or strictly enforced with little or no notice. Unofficial definitions are thus subject to radical change at unpredictable times.

This situation has serious implications for unofficial *oppressive coercive behaviour*, as we can see if we apply the model of secondary adjustments to the case at the start of the paper.

It may be inferred from his defence that Corporal Jenson's construction of his hitting the recruit was what we have called a legitimate secondary adjustment: it was clearly not the first time that he had given out private punishment; he reserved it for those who, in his judgement, deserved it; and his

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experience of the Army's organizational culture during his service, and the unit's at the time, allowed him to infer that it was all right to do so. All this was eloquently declared though his attempted defence and his astonishment and disbelief when it was rejected.

A second ambiguous or marginal area is peer-on-peer activity by a group or individual designed to change others' behaviour in what is perceived as a positive organizational direction or to remove them from the organization. For example, individuals who fail to live up to what are culturally defined as 'soldierly' standards can become an irritant to their peers who may collectively seek to 'bring them up to speed' or, failing that, to reject them as unfit to belong to the group. An unhygienic soldier may, perhaps, find his or her equipment thrown out of the barrack window or into a skip. A soldier who does not fit in socially may frustrate and annoy his or her colleagues and may suffer violent rejection or be deliberately provoked into violence. In general, this *oppressive coercive behaviour* appears to be seen positively by those inflicting it and negatively by those receiving it. The chain of command in the unit may or may not endorse it, depending on the individuals involved, the apparent reasons for rejection of the victim, the nature of the *oppressive coercive behaviour*, and the people in the chain of command. This activity may be called 'mobbing claimed as positive'.

Practical jokes are a special category, as they can be used an indirect way of oppressing individuals, though they are not always identified as 'bullying'.²⁶ In one unit, for example, an officious private soldier clerk – who had power from his position in his sub-unit office but had 'no rank' [i.e. he was not an NCO] – was shown a forged unit routine order saying that all shirts should have medal ribbons sewn onto them (which was not the official practice). As he was very proud of his service in Northern Ireland he was delighted to sew a General Service Medal ribbon onto his shirt, but discovered on parade the following morning that he was the only man in the regiment wearing such a ribbon and was much ridiculed by his peers. As he was virtually friendless in his sub-unit, and he was clearly distressed by the event, I personally saw this as bullying, but most of his peers and members of the chain of command thought it nothing more than a very good 'joke' which he had brought upon himself: it 'served him right'.

The fourth of these areas that defy easy categorization are what have come to be known in the press as 'initiation ceremonies'. On these occasions, those joining existing groups are expected to go through some uncomfortable activity in the presence of their new peers and thus gain acceptance by the

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group. Following a serious set of incidents in the late 1980s these events, which had never been officially sanctioned, were officially banned.²⁷

Social science has a great deal to say on the subject of rites of passage, which is the category into which these 'initiation ceremonies' fall.²⁸ There seems to be a common thread in many, if not most, cultures that joining an existing group often involves initial separation (or 'not belonging'), an intermediate stage where the incomer is in an in-between state ('liminal'), and the third stage when the incomer is fully incorporated ('belonging'). Rites of passage help make these stages concrete and assist in the process of incorporation of the new member into the group.

It appears from occasional press reports that, in spite of draconian official statements (including an amendment to *The Queen's Regulations for the Army*²⁹) which formally ban all types of initiation ceremonies, they still occur at least from time to time.³⁰ Indeed, although the mass media make much of a few high profile cases, the data from my personal research indicate that there were widespread informal 'initiation' or 'induction' processes in the Army between at least 1990 and 1996. I have no reason to suppose that this activity has stopped. In most of the cases that I encountered the events were good-humoured and, although the incomer was always at a disadvantage (and thus vulnerable to *oppressive coercive behaviour*), relatively mild. From the social science point of view they carry out a socially positive function, though they cannot be endorsed from the formal disciplinary point of view. Furthermore, because they are unofficial and not under formal control, they are always accompanied by the possibility that events will escalate to a level that is dangerous or organizationally negative.

It is also worth noting that unofficial rites of passage do not conform to most definitions of 'bullying' because they are single occurrences for the individuals being inducted: they only go through them once. These incidents are neither repeated nor systematic in the recipient's experience. Indeed, they are worthy of separate study, outside the category of 'bullying', but are included in the framework for this paper because they are usually labelled as 'bullying' and they certainly contain at least an element of *oppressive coercive behaviour*.

We must therefore add a new column to the schema that allows for ambiguous or ill-defined *oppressive coercive behaviours*: Figure 4 represents the developed framework encompassing *oppressive coercive behaviour*. It remains to tie in this framework with the definition of 'bullying' in the British military context that we derived above:

Bullying in the British military context can be defined as actions and practices that are directed against one of more soldiers that are unwanted by the

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<i>Oppressive Coercive Behaviour</i>		
Positive	Ambiguous or ill-defined	Negative
1 Use of the authority structure for positive institutional ends		2 Exploitation of the rank and authority structure for personal satisfaction Toxic leadership
3		4 Peer-on-peer (mobbing)
5 Legitimate secondary adjustments involving <i>oppressive coercive behaviour</i>		6 Illegitimate secondary adjustments involving <i>oppressive coercive behaviour</i>
	A Undefined or disputed secondary adjustments	
	B Mobbing claimed as positive	
	C Practical jokes	
	D Informal rites of passage	

Fig 4: Framework Stage Four

recipient, that may be carried out deliberately or unconsciously, but cause humiliation, offence and distress, and cannot be justified as aimed at achieving operationally advantageous results. Such actions may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working and living environment.

Activity in the right hand column of Figure 4 can simply be assigned to the category of 'bullying'. Similarly, however unpleasant the experiences of the recipients may be, activity in the left hand column is likely to fall outside the definition of 'bullying'. The main proviso concerning the left hand column, however, is that, as we have seen, legitimate secondary adjustments are subject to sudden reclassification as illegitimate, and it is possible that individuals may sincerely but incorrectly believe their actions to be legitimate

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when they are not. In these cases the supervision of events by the unit chain of command (from junior NCO upwards, as appropriate to the situation) is an important controlling process.

Activities described by the boxes in the central column (A, B, C, and D) presents special difficulties because of their ambiguous nature. They will be highly susceptible to different constructions by different individuals, even if they all accept our specific definition of 'bullying' in the military context. Indeed, it is to be expected that any activity captured in this column will present challenging disciplinary and management problems in the life of a unit.

Context as a Significant Variable

There is one further important variable which affects the degree to which the legitimacy of *oppressive coercive behaviour* is perceived by members of the Army, particularly in cases where differences in rank are part of the situation, and that is the local context. The same behaviour might well be constructed as negative ('bullying') in one context and positive ('robust management' or 'robust leadership') in another. For example, the Army's need to train for combat requires *oppressive coercive behaviour* during training, as part of the preparation of individuals and teams to act positively and effectively under the frightening, alien, and disorienting conditions of battle. In the case of the infantry, as an illustration, the scope of such training extends from highly controlled and repeated basic weapon handling drills, through small group fire and movement with blank and then live ammunition, to larger exercises with either blank ammunition or weapon effects simulation, to large scale collective training with live ammunition. These different contexts, and the events that take place within them, require different degrees of robustness but they are all part of the positive process of creating cohesive and effective units that can operate successfully in combat with minimal loss of life. Thus leadership in combat is expected to be robust and strong, whilst leadership in undemanding contexts is not. Training for combat provides intermediate cases, where the combat context is reproduced as faithfully as prevailing conditions (including health and safety rules) allow.

Similarly, even in generally undemanding times in barracks when emergencies or circumstances demanding urgent action arise then a degree of robustness is seen as appropriate.

We may therefore characterize a variation in the degree of appropriateness of robust behaviour as depicted in Figure 5.

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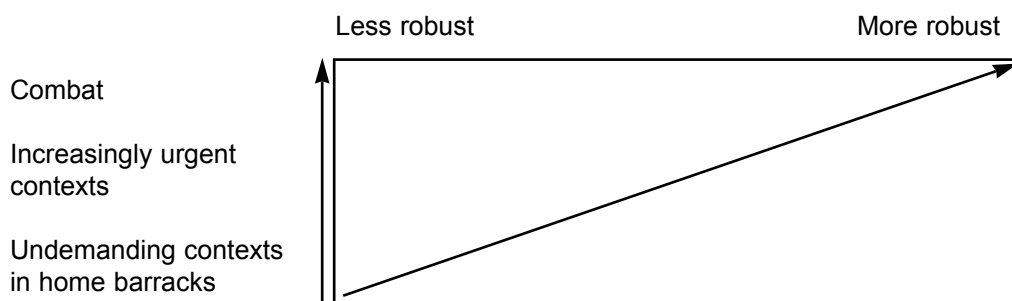


Fig 5: Variation in legitimate *oppressive coercive behaviour* in the training context

Notes to Figure 5:

1. The degree of *oppressive coercive behaviour* which may be seen as appropriate (i.e. perceived as 'not-bullying') varies with the closeness of the situation to 'combat' and the further from normal background life in barracks.
2. The further up the slanting arrow, the more likely it is that *oppressive coercive behaviour* will be viewed as appropriate robust management or leadership, and therefore positive.

Initial training, where young civilians are being transformed into trained soldiers and officers, appears to provide a different family of contexts and would probably need its own version of Figure 5. Robust management is self-evidently needed in many circumstances during initial training to achieve the purpose of preparing soldiers for what may lie ahead in their service. However, experience has shown that robust management with recruits and officer cadets can appear a lot like 'bullying', and in some cases it can cross the line between what is organizationally or individually 'positive' and 'negative'. Because initial training fell outside the research on which this paper is based it remains an area for future study.

An understanding of the legitimacy of *oppressive coercive behaviour* in any particular incident is therefore crucial in judging the presence or absence of 'bullying', and no 'bullying' incident can properly be assessed without due consideration of it. Although there has been no recent publicly available example of this aspect being prominent in an Army 'bullying' incident, it is well illustrated in recent case in the Royal Navy. In this instance, the captain of a submarine behaved in an *oppressive coercive* way towards members of his crew but was found not guilty of bullying by a Court Martial because of the operational situation in which the behaviour was being carried out.³¹

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Conclusion

Because in general usage the expression 'bullying' is an ill-defined and unstable category, and can be constructed in so many ways, it is suggested that it is of little use as an analytical or explanatory term in the context of the British Army, without clear acceptable definition. At the start of this paper we derived a working definition of 'bullying' that incorporated scholarly insights from the wider field of social science in the commercial and industrial context with particular issues that impact on life in the units of the British Army. We also explored, through the case of Corporal Jenson, the different ways that a single example of 'bullying' can be constructed differently by different participants and observers. The expression in this paper '*oppressive coercive behaviour*', although perhaps somewhat clumsy, provides a neutral term against which particular actions can be judged to be positive, negative, or ambiguous. We then derived an overall framework and typology for understanding the range and variability of behaviour that might fall into the category of 'bullying', set out in Figure 4. This typology and associated framework, it is suggested, provides a set of terms with which to describe, analyze and explain (and perhaps in some cases to predict) incidents of *oppressive coercive behaviour* in an objective way and to judge their significance.

This is not to say, however, that the framework in Figure 4, as it currently stands, provides a simple definitive means to apportion blame or decide on guilt in cases where 'bullying' is said to have taken place. Some cases will, indeed, be susceptible to easy categorization. For example, Lance Corporal Leslie Skinner was convicted in 2004 of five counts of indecent assault on recruits when he was serving as a physical training instructor. Any observer and/or participant in the Army's organizational culture would have little difficulty placing this activity in Box 2. On the other hand, consider this fictitious scenario:

A group of male private soldiers living in barracks are strongly opposed to the conduct of one of their peers. They see him as consistently violating the norms of their organizational culture by failure to wash, by not doing his share of work (thus increasing the burden on them), by cynically rejecting ideas that his unit is special or 'the best', and by informally reporting them to their officer for minor infringements of the formal rules. One day he finds that all his military equipment has vanished and when he accuses one of his room-mates of stealing it they collectively attack him.

From the victim's point of view, this attack falls into Box 4 (negative peer-on-peer mobbing). From the perpetrators' point of view it falls into Box B (mob-

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bing for a positive organizational end). From the authorities' point of view it might fall into Box 5 (legitimate secondary adjustment – turn a blind eye because the soldier brought it on himself), or Box 6 (illegitimate secondary adjustment – in applying too much violence the group went too far), depending on the individual perception of those in the chain of command. The context of the event may also be an important variable: did this incident take place on operations, where cooperative teamwork is essential and disruptive elements are potentially life-threatening, or did it take place in peacetime barracks?

The framework should therefore be viewed as a tool with which to address the issues rather than a direct route to an answer. As a tool it provides a set of definitions for any discussion of an incident that might be labelled 'bullying' and for the deconstruction of any use of the word 'bullying' in a legal or investigative context. In essence, it can provide neutral common ground where all interested parties may come together in exploring the issues rather than the ill-defined and variously constructed term 'bullying'.

So far, both Figure 4 and Figure 5 are based on a general (insider) anthropological study of the British Army's culture at unit level, but this research was not specifically aimed at the question of 'bullying', and very little data have been collected after 2003. The frameworks in this paper therefore need to be tested and refined against fresh data specifically connected to the issue. Given the sensitivity of the subject, future research should include confidential interviews with individuals in unit chains of command and with very junior personnel, including both those who have been identified as victims of 'bullying' and their non-'bullied' peers. Special areas for investigation, to test and possibly to extend the framework offered here, should include investigation of cross-race, cross-gender, and cross-sexual orientation *oppressive coercive behaviour*. Certainly, in the absence of such research the issues involved will remain ill-defined, open to unfocused social and personal construction, and marooned in a state in which there is neither an accepted lexicon nor structure.

Notes

1. As is normal practice, the names of all individuals in this paper are pseudonyms, and the context of any case studies has been altered to conserve the theoretical points but to protect the identity of the participants.
2. All case material for this paper is from data on events before 1994, to ensure that all those mentioned (even by pseudonym) are no longer serving in the Army. However, subsequent data indicate that the principles discussed in this paper are current at least as recently as 2002.
3. The social construction of experience has been much written about, particularly in the light of postmodernism, for which it has been a major preoccupation. See,

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for example, in the field of the social sciences, Michael Burawoy, et al., *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

4. See, for example, Helge Hoel, et al., *Abuse in the Workplace: International Perspectives in Research and Practice*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003); Don E. Merten, 'The Cultural Context of Aggression: The Transition to Junior High School', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25, 1 (Mar 1994), 29-43; Peter K. Smith, and Shu Shu, 'What Good Schools Can do about Bullying: Findings from a Survey in English Schools After a Decade of Research and Action', *Childhood*, 7, 2, 193-212; Simone Fullagar, 'Wasted Lives: The Social Dynamics of Shame and Youth Suicide', *Journal of Sociology*, 39, 3, 291-307.

5. A literature search has so far only identified James K. Whither, 'Battling Bullying in the British Army 1987-2004', *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 1, 2004, <http://www.pipss.org/document46.html>, accessed 2 September 2006, and the House of Commons, Defence Committee Report, *Duty of Care*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 3 March 2005.

6. See, for example, a recent BBC News report 'Film Leads to Army Bullying Probe', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4739955.stm>, accessed 2 September 2006; Joanna Bourke, 'From Surrey to Basra, Abuse is a Fact of British Army Life: Officers who blame "a few bad apples" ignore a culture of brutalisation', *The Guardian*, <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0226-29.htm>, accessed 2 September 2006; Leading Article, 'The Bullying Culture of the British Army', *The Independent*, 15 March 2005.

7. This study resulted in a PhD thesis (Charles Kirke, 'Social Structures in the Regular Combat Arms Units of the British Army: a Model', Unpublished PhD. Thesis, Shrivenham, Cranfield University, 2002, <https://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/bitstream/1826/1054/1/Kirke+PhD.pdf>, accessed 7 September 2006, and various other publications on organizational cultural aspects of the British army, including, for example, Charles Kirke, 'Organizational Culture – the Unexpected Force', *Journal of Battlefield Technology*, 7, 2 11-18; Charles Kirke, 'Postmodernism to Structure: an Upstream Journey for the Military Recruit' in *Defence Management in Uncertain Times*, ed. E. R. Holmes and T. McConville (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 139-155.

8. House of Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*.

9. *Ibid.*, 97.

10. *Ibid.*, 98.

11. See, for example, Stale Einarsen, et al., 'The Concept of Bullying at Work', in *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace: International Perspectives in Research and Practice*, ed. Stale Einarsen, et al. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 3-29; and Helge Hoel and Denise Salin, 'Organisational Antecedents of Workplace Bullying', 203-218.

12. Einarsen et al., 'The Concept of Bullying at Work', 6., citing Stale Einarsen and B.I Raknes, 'Harassment at Work and the Victimization of Men', *Violence and Victims*, 12, 247-263.

13. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968), xiii.

14. 'Soldiers' in this paper refers to all members of a military unit, regardless of rank.

15. See Charles Kirke, 'Articulated Common Sense? An Anthropological View of Life at Regimental Duty', 134 (Summer 2004), 53-58, for an account of different modes

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of behaviour ('social structures') in different types of context within a British Army unit. A full account is in Kirke, 'Social Structures in the Regular Combat Arms Units of the British Army: a Model' (see note 9 above).

16. For definitions associated with toxic leadership, and for exploration of the issues, see, for example, Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad*, (London: Quorum Books, 1996); Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We can Survive Them*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17. Whicker, *Toxic Leaders*, *passim* (see especially 58).

18. *Ibid.*, 11.

19. Toxic leadership in the specific (US) military context is explored in George E. Reed, 'Toxic Leadership', *Military Review*, July-August 2004: 67-71. See also Denise F. Williams, *Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Army*, U.S. Army War College, Pennsylvania, 2005.

20. See remarks in Commons Defence Committee, *Duty of Care*, 13, 84, for example.

21. *Ibid.*, 104.

22. H. Leymann, 'Mobbing and the Development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders', *The European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5, (1996): 251-276, cited in Helge Hoel, et al., 'Workplace Bullying and Stress', *Historical and Current Perspectives on Stress and Health*, 2, (2002), 293-333, this 297-298.

23. Charles Kirke, 'Navigating the Rules: Modelling Individual Strategies in the British Army', Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, Chicago, Ill, 24-26 October 2003.

24. Goffman, *Asylums*, 171-186.

25. *Ibid.*, 173.

26. Hoel and Salin, 'Organisational Antecedents of Workplace Bullying', citing Stale Einarsen and B.I. Rakness, 'Harassment in the Workplace and the Victimization of Men', *Violence and Victims*, 12, (1997): 247-263.

27. James K. Whither, 'Battling Bullying in the British Army', 2.

28. Rites of Passage were first written about by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 (see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee), (Chicago, Ill: Chicago University Press, 1960). Recent work includes Donna Winslow, 'Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne', *Armed Forces and Society*, 25 (Spring 1999), 429-457; Barry Stephenson, 'Ritual criticism of a contemporary rite of passage', *Journal of Ritual Studies* 17, 1 (2003), 32-41; Jennifer Johnson-Hanks, 'On the limits of life stages in ethnography: toward a theory of vital conjunctures', *American Anthropologist*, 104, 3 (2002): 865-80; Don E. Merten, 'Transitions and "trouble": rites of passage for suburban girls', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 36, 2 (2005), 132-48.

29. MOD, *The Queen's Regulations for The Army 1975* (including Amendment 24), (London: HMSO, March 2001.)

30. See, for example, 'Paras' Sick Babooning Torture: MOD Probe Elite Unit', *The People*, London, 12 June 2005, <http://www.corpun.com/uki00506.htm>, accessed 6 September 2006; 'Marine Bullying Video Condemned' BBC News, Sunday 27 November 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4475034.stm>, accessed 6 September 2006.

31. See BBC News report 16 January 2006 'Sub Captain Cleared of Bullying', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/hampshire/4617924.stm>, accessed 7 September 2006.

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